

EMBASSY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Op-Ed on Election Challenges

By

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Democracy is not easy and it is not always pretty. In most countries, it is always a work in progress. Good democracies strive to include, educate and encourage all eligible voters. This is important but never easy.

During the recent United States election there was a lot of talk about the possibility of rigged election practices, but likely little actual election fraud. There are people who are upset about the fact that Secretary Clinton won the popular vote, but not the Electoral College. But both campaigns knew the rules before the election began and should have had a path to victory outlined. Knowing the rules for ballot access, for campaigning, and for the election are critical to a successful election. The candidate, the staff and the volunteers must all know the rules in order to win.

In U.S. elections and many other democracies, participation is a challenge. Democracies function best when more voters vote. In Sweden, when people turn 18 years old, they are immediately eligible to vote. Normally they have more than 80% voter turnout for their elections. Because everyone is eligible to participate, people do. Not only in voting but as poll watchers, ballot counters and the like. In the United States, recent election cycles have been plagued by efforts to diminish voter turnout and many places have made it harder to register to vote. Thus, the percentage of participation has gone down.

This year in the United States there was much more concern than usual about voter fraud and election security. Ironically, some of the election systems that people complain about at other times likely helped to keep the elections free and fair. In the United States, each municipality runs their election slightly differently. Some places vote with a paper ballot, some areas have electronic voting machines. Systems are not even uniform within a state. Sometimes this can cause delays in ballot counting. However this lack of uniformity makes it virtual impossible for wide spread cyber intrusion. Final vote totals are all put in to the computer and counted centrally, but they are not all voted on the same system, so the actual voting system cannot be

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hacked. It is extremely unlikely that a cyber-intrusion could interfere with the overall results of an election in the United States.

Participation - more is better. Elections are more likely to reflect the will of the people if more people participate. Not just in voting but in training for how to be election workers and poll watchers and in working with the political parties and reporting on what is happening. If there are more people trained to work the polls honestly, more trained to watch the polls and more reporters trained to report on the results, it is harder for vote fraud to occur. That said, there are situations where the party in power controls all of the mechanics of the election, and it takes very strong people to work very hard for a free and fair result. We say that free and fair elections are like a three legged stool. In order to stand up, you need one leg of an informed electorate, another leg of a free press and the third leg of civil society working for transparency.

I believe that some of the old methods of voting are better at stopping election fraud. For example, I trust paper ballots more than the modern computer system. I also believe that if you dip someone's thumb in ink, or use a fingerprint it is a pretty accurate way of seeing if they have already voted.

As I said earlier, more participation is better and more observation is better. In the United States people are paid a small amount to be a trained to be a judge of election and to be Election Day workers. Even so, in some communities it is hard to recruit enough election workers. Typically election observers and poll watchers are trained by civil society groups and political parties and volunteer to watch the elections for fair practices.

Finally, for any election to be able to be deemed free of fraud, the media must be allowed to observe and report on the campaign at every step. Political leaders who want to run a democracy must respect the media and let them do their job.

If a democracy wants to make sure that they have a result that won't be questioned, the formula is simple. Make it easier for people to vote, make it desirable to work in the election process, and let the media do their job. Democracy works when government respects all three.

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